

HOW TO BE STRONG: UNITE THE RESISTANCE

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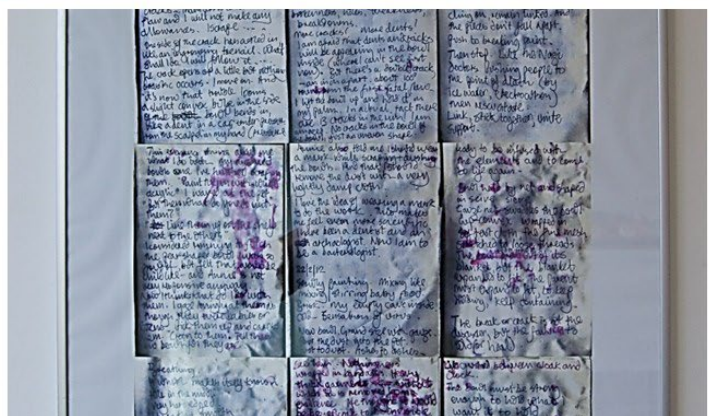
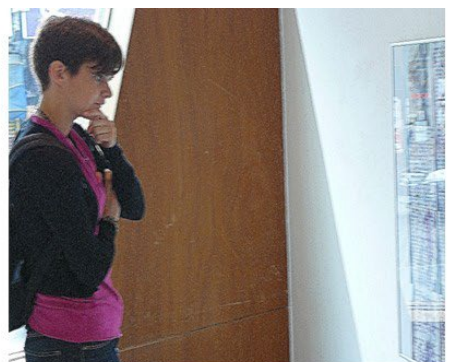
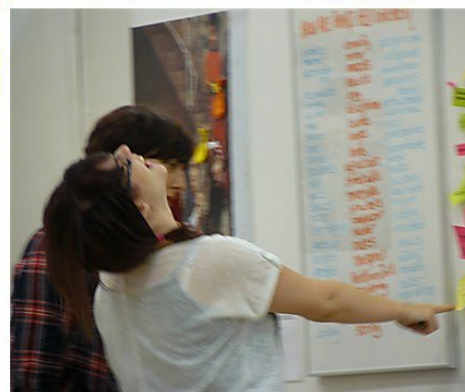
UNITE THE RESISTANCE

A collection of handmade white and terracotta clay bowls, rough-edged, cracked, in various size, with the appearance of eggshells. Some contain sgraffito words such as 'austerity', 'want', 'resistance'. Some are overlaid or wrapped in bandages.

'Unite the Resistance' is digital photograph depicting clay, paper and text sculptural artefacts created by the artist, writer and socialist activist Nicola Field, during 2011 and 2012. Together with handmade books, documents, poetic writings, interactive games and further digital photographs and video, these works form the mixed-media, composite project HOW TO BE STRONG. Combining focussed emotional reflexivity, lived-experience testimony, and sharp political engagement, HOW TO BE STRONG embodies a defiant and playful process of creative critique for the age of austerity and an emotive protest against state attacks on disabled people.

Elements of HOW TO BE STRONG have been installed in exhibition and community cultural spaces, including Tower Bridge Engine Rooms, Ortus with Bethlem Gallery, Peckham Space, Art Hub, Inclusion London, The Biscuit Factory, and the Jeremy

Bentham Room at University College, London during the Marxism Festival 2012. Each installation has been unique and site-specific.







Unite the Resistance, 2012
 Digital photograph of ceramics with text

Part of a mixed-media project entitled 'How the Resistance' is inspired by the campaign Disabled People Against Cuts. It offers a creative response to disability, exploring how connections and unity or collective strength.

Nicola Field is a writer, artist, filmmaker combining the intensely personal v

Unite the Resistance, 2012
 die Fotografie von Keramik mit Text

Die 'Resistance' ist Teil eines Mischtechnik-Projekts mit dem Titel 'How the Resistance' und inspiriert von der Kampagnenarbeit der Gruppe Disabled People Against Cuts. Es bietet eine kreative Antwort auf Unterdrückung und Sparmaßnahmen zu Lasten von Menschen mit Behinderungen, indem es aufzeigt, wie Kontakte und gemeinsames Handeln die Verletzlichkeit des Einzelnen in eine kollektive Kraft transformieren können.

Nicola Field ist eine Schriftstellerin, Künstlerin, Filmemacherin und Aktivistin, die seit über 30 Jahren das schonungslos Private mit dem zutiefst Politischen verknüpft.

Unite the Resistance, 2012
 amérique de céramiques accompagnée de texte

Le cadre d'un projet combinant plusieurs techniques intitulé « How the Resistance » (Comment être fort), « Unite the Resistance » s'inspire de la campagne de l'organisation Disabled People Against Cuts. Il offre une réponse créative à la situation austère des personnes handicapées et à l'expression qu'elles subissent en explorant de quelle manière les liens de l'unité peuvent transformer la vulnérabilité en force collective.

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The project displays the shared-space collaboration, narrative nature, open-endedness, and process-driven combination of the visual, the written and the critical that has come to characterise Nicola's creative output. Late-identified autism has helped her to embrace the obsessive, intensely detailed precision which drove her to make and continue making **HOW TO BE STRONG** over a period



of nearly two years.

Nicola became interested in clay and various ways it can be used in art, specifically focusing on the use of clay as a medium for articulating thoughts and feelings about her body, exclusion, alienation and disabling chronic illness, and the evolving political climate, in 2011-2012.

In 2011, she joined a local adult education ceramics class in an effort to address her sense of isolation and loss of purpose from not being able to tolerate the job environment, and began working with earthenware and stoneware clays. Without any conscious decision, she found herself trying to create a bowl as thin as an eggshell. As she started each new bowl, she became deeply involved in seeing how far it could be pushed in terms of thinness until it cracked, wore through, or broke (to her cries of dismay). Knives, wires, credit cards, metal 'kidney' tools, spoons – all were employed in the tremulous work of creating, nurturing, protecting, hurting. Water, saliva, tears,

soft clay, PVA glue were rushed in, to patch and mend. The effortful drama of striving, mothering, harming and healing was played out in the social space of the class. Tentatively, words began to appear in the clay, painstakingly scratched and gouged.

Nicola says: 'This is where I learned how I could make work with and within the shared energy of a group, contained and set free in a designated space and measure of time. I felt safe to go within and be completely with myself in a way that feels impossible when I am actually alone or have free time. Now, I realise, I thrive with body-doubling.'



Emotional and physical fragility became expressed. She found that she was being led into questioning fundamental issues of containment and safety. This led to connections with the coalition government's 'austerity' programme of cuts to benefits and public services – and with the resistance to these draconian attacks on working-class people's lives. The targets of so-called government 'welfare reform' were disabled people, those living with chronic illnesses and mental distress. Many attending the ceramics classes were directly affected by intimidating new assessment processes, punitive financial sanctions, threats of forced labour and the pervasive atmosphere of scapegoating and fear. This state-sponsored disability hate was compounded by severe cuts in Adult Education, and access to the classes was under attack with the removal of concessionary rates for pensioners and those who rely on welfare benefits. Such fees rocketed from £45 to £172 each term. With students unable to pay, the entire class was under threat. Nicola and other Adult Education students launched a defiant campaign to save all the classes - petitioning, demonstrating and occupying the building – which succeeded in restoring the concessionary rates.

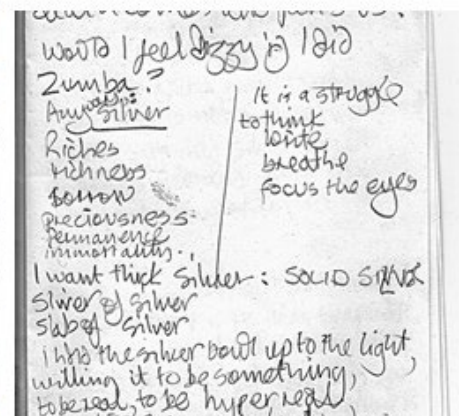
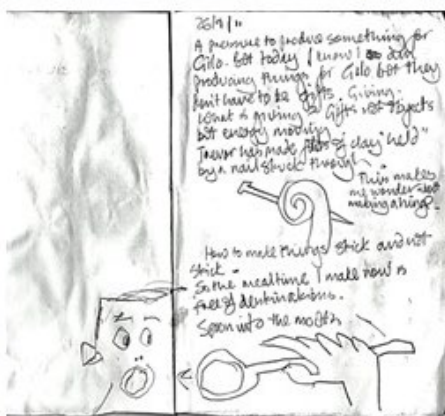
Considering resistance and resilience led her to then experiment with mending, or not mending, allowing the bowls to remain in whatever state they found themselves, keeping what she had scraped away as valuable fragments, storing the dust and fragments in cones of paper which she sealed with tape, and dated. She began to think of herself as an archaeologist: excavating, discovering, brushing away deposits to reveal the object and its story underneath. Bagging up the remains for forensic examination and reference.



The objects emerged as expressions of how she felt about her body, CFS/ME and the child within her, as well as her position in relation to her immediate environment, everyday life and contemporary political events. Inscribing text and exploring limits, she rejected glaze in favour of the raw, naked quality of bare clay. Frustrated with the limits of the weekly ceramic class, she bought modelling clay and carried on making bowls at home in round-bottomed cereal and mixing bowls she had in her kitchen cupboard. This was where the notion of using dressings and bandages entered the process. The modelling clay was air-dried, not fired, so gauze, cotton dressings and elastic bandages could be worked into the containers, becoming part of the bowls, overlaying 'wounds' and cradling the weak structures.

Writing and visual text

At first, she wrote a diary after each class, recording the process and the feelings she had while making the work. Then, instinctively, she began writing *during* the process, and each week made a series of individually titled, small, handwritten books, each made by folding a sheet of A3 cartridge paper and cutting the right-hand edges to make A5 pages.



She wrote down fragments of conversation between participants, sensations and emotions that arose from working with the tools and the materials, connections between what was happening in the classroom and what was happening in wider

society. She drew little diagrams and wrote out sums, and intuitively, argumentative reflections on incidents in her own life, outside the class, flowed onto the pages. She transcribed this writing and began to understand it as a parallel creative process of documentation, reflexivity, life-writing and visual text. The following passage is a transcription of one of the 'little books':

CUTS

May 10 2012

Simeon¹ says there are cuts in psychology services.

They have reduced community staff. His community psychiatric nurse used to visit last year. Caseloads are enormous. He says: *'I've been putting it out of my mind. Avoiding certain thoughts and feelings.'*

Avoid the horror. Stay in the shallows. Never try to swim. Stick to water-resistant pastels.

We murmur and curse to show that what is happening is unacceptable to us. To show that we have high standards. *'Please excuse my cough.'* *'Please excuse the untidiness.'*

I thought it might be possible to cut out the parts of me I don't like. *Scrape scrape.* I thought therapists and mentors would come in wielding scalpels and hammers to smash and cut, crush and excise. Cut out, censor, excise. Exorcise, scissor. Ex-scissor. Blunt, rusty, sharp, shining.

¹ Names and identifiers have been changed

It wouldn't be hail if it didn't hurt. Bombardment.

It wouldn't be good for you if it didn't hurt. A decade of pain predicted for public services. It hurts us more than it hurts them. Pain gain, rain hail, bullets.

A decade of brocade and Lucozade Aids Recovery. Recession double dip reduced fat dip sherbet dip.

Loss and Lowing Leaning Learning

This morning my bowl was sweating under the cling film. A film that clings, wrings sweat and tears from a blood-and-bone body.

A dance in front of you shakes and shimmers in the blood and vital organs. Heat is generated. Horror generates heat. Energy of evidence. The damage inside is part of the change. It's included. Don't be left out. Don't leave your horror to play all on its own. Not fair not fair. Let me in. Hold me in. Hold this in. Not gulp back, hold gently feel the scrapes bumps and curves. Feel the urgent need. Urgent need for psychological services.

This bowl I want to make strong and smooth but thin. Can I stop eating too much? Can I stop making so much? Why do I want this barrier up? Barrier of flesh.

Again, the glue is like baby food. I give it a little mix then offer it to the wide open mouth of the bowl. It has no choice. It can't close its mouth. The outside is much huger than the inside. The outside

surface is much larger than the inside surface but the surfaces share the same inner substance. It's all done with mirrors. Physics are too much for me but I am physical. How can my brain not understand its own workings? How can my mind understand my body? Does my body understand my mind? I hope that when I die I will feed the earth.

The bottom of the bowl has torn. A tear might knit together. I have accidentally missed two pages in this book! What can it mean?

The part of Pete that was looking after Pete is being punished by the part of him that he neglected. He told me to just put everything on my credit card. Now they have taken his credit card away and I actually think he is rather stupid and irresponsible. And yet he loves me and is very kind to me. I don't understand how I can hold this all of this at once.

I touched the insides of the bowl to feel how thick they are. The density and weight. I have too much weight. I need to be lighter. Perhaps then it would be less tiring to move myself around. I'd like to be thin with curly hair.

I keep hurting my left hand. God is supposed to be lefthanded. One more tear and I will stop scraping. I will create an egg from the scrapings - no, a pearl - and lay it in the bowl, like a story made up in a dream. Lucy Partington.² If you sit very still you

² Lucy Partington disappeared in 1973, aged 21. Twenty years later her remains were recovered from 25 Cromwell Street, Gloucester. She had been abducted, gagged, raped, tortured and murdered by Fred West and Rosemary West. Her sister Marion Partington's memoir 'If You Sit Very Still: a sister's fierce engagement with traumatic loss' was published in May 2012, in the week 'CUTS' was written.

will hear the sun move. She wrote about a body full of worry and a hand that could frame the sky.

Is it OK to read 4 books at once? You have to believe that you will live long enough to finish the book you are reading.

This bowl lets me cut off the rough rim, pick off the fibres of its being, to let it live thin and smooth. It trusts me not to let it die.

Fragments of this text, which explores deeply personal and political matters, have been integrated into the gallery labelling process (alongside more formal element such as titles and dates) so that the labels become part of the work and interact with the bowls and the text in the bowls.

Bowls

Clay, text

2012

Condensation. Not enough kindness in the world. Selfishness, competition, flat edge. Unbroken. The flame is flickering. Everything that is solid melts into air. The ground is shifting. People slipped in the doors like vapours. They were seen hiding. No gain only pain. A day's pay; a day's pain. The rim definite, cracking, faltering. What good will it do? Those that were solid are now invisible. We need blood and bone. Stop the supplies. The yellowish stuff that bleeds in place of blood. The white blood cells multiply. The baby who died when her white blood cells multiplied. I did not hold her. I held on. A man said GET BACK TO WORK YOU LAZY CUNTS. Leaders take the subs. Union subs. Union dues. Union subdues. The disabled have the moral high ground. We have no muscle. We have blood and bone. We have the yellowish stuff that bleeds in place of blood. Lymph. Scraping today is more like stroking, grazing, skimming the surface. Don't go too deep. You might break through, crack open, break down, crack up. I can hold everyone. I hollow myself, make space, let people climb in. Hold on. The holding will hold.

Nicola is now assembling a book, *How to Be Strong*, which unites these writings with critical commentary and analysis, photographs of the bowls and books, documentation of the site-specific installations, and playful inserts.

Find out more about **HOW TO BE STRONG** at:

<https://nicolafield.co.uk/projects/how-to-be-strong/>

HOW ARE THINGS HELD TOGETHER?

girders
mortar
buttercream
icing
nuts and bolts
interface
Ho-hok
shoe
shingles
knobs
switches
stickiness
duty
quilt
coercion
force
vice-like grips
possession
bristles
griddles
commitment
mothering
Smothering
cradling

tenacity
terror
MUCUS
elastic
egg
discipline
twine
loops
love
affection
timetable
routine
brackets
conductor
solder
RULES
The Queen
The Union Jack
rendering
respect
skin
string

putting a small
antidepressant
nails and screws
suspension of
disbelief
vertical combined
with horizontal
velcro
understanding
blood and bone
gristle
muscle
sellotape
rubber bands
tension
cuddling
arms linked
loyalty
solidarity
empathy
belts
hooks and eyes
war p
uniforms
straps



